

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
NORTHERN DIVISION

DALE HARPER,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:21-cv-174

v.

Honorable Jane M. Beckering

MICHAEL BROWN et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's complaint for failure to state a claim.

Discussion

I. Factual allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Kinross Correctional Facility (KCF) in Kincheloe, Chippewa County, Michigan. The events about which he complains occurred at that facility. Plaintiff sues the following KCF personnel:

Warden Michael Brown, Mail Room Supervisor Jessica Dumbach,¹ and Mail Room Staff Unknown Parties #1.

According to the complaint and documents attached to it, Plaintiff's sister paid \$60.00 to order the "Platinum, Gold and Black magazines"² from "Gyro Magazine Company" (GMC) and directed delivery to Plaintiff. (ECF No. 1-1, PageID.12.) The magazines apparently never made it to Plaintiff. On February 3, 2021, KCF mailroom personnel allegedly rejected the mail and returned it to the sender purportedly because the address on the shipment was incomplete. The complaint does not describe whether GMC issued or denied a credit or whether GMC reattempted shipment. Plaintiff contends that magazine company used the complete and correct address. He attaches a screenshot allegedly showing an email from a shipper with his address and the tracking number of the shipment. (ECF No. 1-1.) Plaintiff also attaches documents from another prisoner who ordered and received the magazines several weeks after Plaintiff's shipment was returned. (ECF Nos. 1-2; 1-4; 1-6.)

When Plaintiff did not receive the delivery, he wrote a letter to Defendants Brown and Dumbach, and he filed a grievance. In response to Plaintiff's Step II grievance appeal, Defendant Brown informed Plaintiff that his mail was returned to the sender. In a separate email, Defendant Dumbach wrote that Defendant Brown approved "Goat Magazine Platinum Foreplay Vol 2"³ for release to the prison population. (ECF No. 1-5, PageID.25.) Plaintiff argues that Defendant Brown's and Defendant Dumbach's responses were "tantamount to directly participating in the

¹ Defendant Dumbach's last name appears to be spelled "Dumback." (See ECF No. 1-5, PageID.25.) Notwithstanding the misspelling, the Court will use the name as provided by Plaintiff.

² The publications are alternatively referred to as "books" and known by the name *Foreplay Vol. 2*. (See ECF No. 1-2, PageID.14; No. 1-3, PageID.16, 19; No. 1-5, PageID.25.)

³ GMC and Goat Magazine appear to be one and the same.

denial of [P]laintiff's rights" because they "implicitly authorized, approved or knowingly acquiesced by tacit agreement, when they failed or otherwise refused to identify the unknown mailroom staff" (Compl., ECF No. 1, PageID.3.)

Plaintiff asserts that Defendants denied his mail in violation of the First Amendment, denied him due process in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, and denied Plaintiff equal protection of the laws in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

For relief, Plaintiff seeks \$75,000 in compensatory damages and \$150,000 in punitive damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails "to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests." *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff's allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) ("Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice."). The court must determine whether the complaint contains "enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face." *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a "probability requirement," . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). "[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not 'show[n]'—that the pleader is entitled to relief." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P.

8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

A. Respondeat superior

Plaintiff fails to allege that Defendants Brown and Dumbach took any action against him, other than to suggest that they failed to adequately supervise their subordinates or respond to Plaintiff's grievances or letters. Government officials may not be held liable for the unconstitutional conduct of their subordinates under a theory of respondeat superior or vicarious liability. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676; *Monell v. New York City Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 691(1978); *Everson v. Leis*, 556 F.3d 484, 495 (6th Cir. 2009). A claimed constitutional violation must be based upon active unconstitutional behavior. *Grinter v. Knight*, 532 F.3d 567, 575–76 (6th Cir. 2008); *Greene v. Barber*, 310 F.3d 889, 899 (6th Cir. 2002). The acts of one's subordinates are not enough, nor can supervisory liability be based upon the mere failure to act. *Grinter*, 532 F.3d at 576; *Greene*, 310 F.3d at 899; *Summers v. Leis*, 368 F.3d 881, 888 (6th Cir. 2004). Moreover, § 1983 liability may not be imposed simply because a supervisor denied an administrative grievance or failed to act based upon information contained in a grievance. *See Shehee v. Luttrell*, 199 F.3d 295, 300 (6th Cir. 1999). “[A] plaintiff must plead that each

Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676.

The Sixth Circuit repeatedly has summarized the minimum required to constitute active conduct by a supervisory official:

“[A] supervisory official's failure to supervise, control or train the offending individual is not actionable *unless* the supervisor either encouraged the specific incident of misconduct or in some other way directly participated in it.” *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300 (emphasis added) (internal quotation marks omitted). We have interpreted this standard to mean that “at a minimum,” the plaintiff must show that the defendant “at least implicitly authorized, approved, or knowingly acquiesced in the unconstitutional conduct of the offending officers.”

Peatross v. City of Memphis, 818 F.3d 233, 242 (6th Cir. 2016) (quoting *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300, and citing *Phillips v. Roane Cnty.*, 534 F.3d 531, 543 (6th Cir. 2008)); *see also Copeland v. Machulis*, 57 F.3d 476, 481 (6th Cir. 1995) (citing *Rizzo v. Goode*, 423 U.S. 362, 375–76 (1976), and *Bellamy v. Bradley*, 729 F.2d 416, 421 (6th Cir. 1984)); *Walton v. City of Southfield*, 995 F.2d 1331, 1340 (6th Cir. 1993); *Leach v. Shelby Cnty. Sheriff*, 891 F.2d 1241, 1246 (6th Cir. 1989).

Plaintiff fails to allege any facts showing that Defendants Brown and Dumbach encouraged or condoned the conduct of their subordinates, or authorized, approved or knowingly acquiesced in the conduct. Indeed, he fails to allege any facts at all about their conduct beyond their responses to his grievance. His vague and conclusory allegations of supervisory responsibility are insufficient to demonstrate that Defendants Brown and Dumbach were personally involved in the return of the magazine to the sender. Likewise, Plaintiff's conclusory allegations that Defendants Brown and Dumbach “implicitly authorized, approved or knowingly acquiesced” (Compl., ECF No. 1, PageID.3), are insufficient. Plaintiff fails to allege the manner in which Defendants Brown and Dumbach purportedly authorized, approved, or knowingly acquiesced. Conclusory allegations of unconstitutional conduct without specific factual allegations fail to state a claim under § 1983. *See Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678–79; *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555.

Because Plaintiff's § 1983 action against Defendants Brown and Dumbach is premised on nothing more than respondeat superior liability and conclusory allegations, his action against them fails to state a claim. Accordingly, the Court will dismiss them from the action.

B. First Amendment

Plaintiff's primary First Amendment argument suggests that he was entitled to receive the magazines his sister ordered as part of his mail.

The First Amendment applies to a prisoner's receipt of incoming mail, but the right is subject to limitation by legitimate penological interests. *Sheets v. Moore*, 97 F.3d 164, 166 (6th Cir. 1996); *Knop v. Johnson*, 977 F.2d 996, 1012 (6th Cir. 1992).

Plaintiff complains about one instance in which his incoming mail failed to reach him. Generally, "isolated instances of interference with prisoners' mail" do not rise to the level of a constitutional violation under the First Amendment. *See Johnson v. Wilkinson*, No. 98-3866, 2000 WL 1175519 (6th Cir. Aug. 11, 2000) (citing *Gardner v. Howard*, 109 F.3d 427, 431 (8th Cir. 1997) (holding that an "isolated incident, without any evidence of improper motive or resulting interference with [the inmate's] right to counsel or to access to the courts, does not give rise to a constitutional violation.")); *Colvin v. Caruso*, 605 F.3d 282, 293 (6th Cir. 2010) (citing *Johnson* for the holding that "isolated incidents" of interference with prisoners' rights do not rise to the level of a First Amendment violation); *Okoro v. Scibana*, 63 F. App'x 182, 184 (6th Cir. 2003) (stating "Okoro was only able to provide one specific incident where he allegedly did not receive the full contents of a letter from his wife. Such a random and isolated incident is insufficient to establish a constitutional violation."). Plaintiff's failure to receive a mail delivery on one occasion, or in one particular month if the magazines had recurring deliveries, appears to have been an isolated occurrence. Thus, Plaintiff's allegations are not sufficient to state a First Amendment claim.

C. Fourteenth Amendment

Plaintiff also asserts Fourteenth Amendment claims against Defendant Unknown Parties #1 for denying him due process and for denying him equal protection of the laws.

1. Due process

Plaintiff's due process claim alleges that the magazines were addressed completely and correctly, and Defendant Brown approved the title for distribution to the prisoners, but Defendant Unknown Parties #1 rejected Plaintiff's incoming magazines without a hearing.

Plaintiff's due process claim is barred by the doctrine of *Parratt v. Taylor*, 451 U.S. 527 (1981), *overruled in part by Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327 (1986). Under *Parratt*, a person deprived of property by a "random and unauthorized act" of a state employee has no federal due process claim unless the state fails to afford an adequate post-deprivation remedy. If an adequate post-deprivation remedy exists, the deprivation, although real, is not "without due process of law." *Parratt*, 451 U.S. at 537. This rule applies to both negligent and intentional deprivations of property, as long as the deprivation was not done pursuant to an established state procedure. *See Hudson v. Palmer*, 468 U.S. 517, 530–36 (1984). Because Plaintiff's claim is premised upon allegedly unauthorized acts of a state official, he must plead and prove the inadequacy of state post-deprivation remedies. *See Copeland v. Machulis*, 57 F.3d 476, 479–80 (6th Cir. 1995); *Gibbs v. Hopkins*, 10 F.3d 373, 378 (6th Cir. 1993). Under settled Sixth Circuit authority, a prisoner's failure to sustain this burden requires dismissal of his § 1983 due-process action. *See Brooks v. Dutton*, 751 F.2d 197 (6th Cir. 1985).

Plaintiff has not sustained his burden in this case. Plaintiff has not alleged that state post-deprivation remedies are inadequate. Moreover, numerous state post-deprivation remedies are available to him. First, a prisoner who incurs a loss through no fault of his own may petition the institution's Prisoner Benefit Fund for compensation. Mich. Dep't of Corr., Policy Directive

04.07.112, ¶ B (effective Dec. 12, 2013). Aggrieved prisoners may also submit claims for property loss of less than \$1,000 to the State Administrative Board. Mich. Comp. Laws § 600.6419; MDOC Policy Directive 03.02.131 (effective Oct. 21, 2013). Alternatively, Michigan law authorizes actions in the Court of Claims asserting tort or contract claims “against the state and any of its departments or officers.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 600.6419(1)(a) (eff. Nov. 12, 2013). The Sixth Circuit specifically has held that Michigan provides adequate post-deprivation remedies for deprivation of property. *See Copeland*, 57 F.3d at 480. Plaintiff does not allege any reason why a state-court action would not afford him complete relief for the deprivation, either negligent or intentional, of his personal property. Accordingly, Plaintiff’s due process claim will be dismissed.

2. Equal protection

Plaintiff’s final claim alleges that he was “treated differently” from those “similarly situated” in violation of his right to “Equal Protection” (Compl., ECF No. 1, PageID.5.)

The Equal Protection Clause prohibits discrimination by government actors which either burdens a fundamental right, targets a suspect class, or intentionally treats one differently than others similarly situated without any rational basis for the difference. *Rondigo, L.L.C. v. Twp. of Richmond*, 641 F.3d 673, 681–82 (6th Cir. 2011); *Radvansky v. City of Olmsted Falls*, 395 F.3d 291, 312 (6th Cir. 2005). The threshold element of an equal protection claim is disparate treatment. *Scarborough v. Morgan Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, 470 F.3d 250, 260 (6th Cir. 2006); *Ctr. for Bio-Ethical Reform, Inc. v. Napolitano*, 648 F.3d 365, 379 (6th Cir. 2011) (“To state an equal protection claim, a plaintiff must adequately plead that the government treated the plaintiff ‘disparately as compared to similarly situated persons and that such disparate treatment either burdens a fundamental right, targets a suspect class, or has no rational basis.’”).

Plaintiff offers little to aid the Court’s resolution of his putative equal protection claim. In the complaint, Plaintiff references “equal protection” and “similarly situated” but without

providing any explanation and only scant factual allegations that clearly support such a claim. Plaintiff attaches documents alleging that a few weeks after his delivery was returned to the sender another prisoner at KCF received a delivery of the same magazines.

An “equal protection” plaintiff must be similarly situated to his comparators “in all relevant respects” *Nordlinger v. Hahn*, 505 U.S. 1, 10 (1992); *United States v. Green*, 654 F.3d 637, 651 (6th Cir. 2011); *see also Paterek v. Vill. of Armada*, 801 F.3d 630, 650 (6th Cir. 2015) (“‘Similarly situated’ is a term of art—a comparator . . . must be similar in ‘all relevant respects.’”); *Tree of Life Christian Schools v. City of Upper Arlington*, 905 F.3d 357, 368 (6th Cir. 2018) (“A plaintiff bringing an equal protection claim must be ‘similarly situated’ to a comparator in ‘all relevant respects.’”). Plaintiff’s allegation implies that he and the other prisoner were similarly situated, but he states no facts to support that implication. Absent such allegations, Plaintiff cannot show that he is similarly situated to the comparators. *See Braun v. Ann Arbor Charter Twp.*, 519 F.3d 564, 575 (6th Cir. 2008) (“Although the plaintiffs claim that they have been treated differently from other individuals seeking rezoning, they fail to allege any specific examples of *similarly situated* individuals”); *see also Umani v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, 432 F. App’x 453, 460 (6th Cir. 2011) (To be a similarly-situated person, “the comparative [prisoner] ‘must have dealt with the same [decisionmaker], have been subject to the same standards, and have engaged in the same conduct without such differentiating or mitigating circumstances that would distinguish their conduct or [the defendant’s] treatment of them for it.’”) (quoting *Ercegovich v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.*, 154 F.3d 344, 352 (6th Cir. 1998)); *Project Reflect, Inc. v. Metropolitan Nashville Bd. of Public Educ.*, 947 F. Supp. 2d 868, 881 (M.D. Tenn. 2013) (“‘Plaintiffs . . . fail to plead the existence of a similarly situated comparator . . . [therefore,] the Complaint does not contain sufficient factual matter to state a plausible claim.’”).

Therefore, because Plaintiff fails to allege facts to show that comparators are similarly situated, Plaintiff has failed to state an Equal Protection claim. Accordingly, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's equal protection claim.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff's complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must next decide whether an appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997). Although the Court concludes that Plaintiff's claims are properly dismissed, the Court does not conclude that any issue Plaintiff might raise on appeal would be frivolous. *Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). Accordingly, the Court does not certify that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$505.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to § 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610–11, unless Plaintiff is barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the “three-strikes” rule of § 1915(g). If he is barred, he will be required to pay the \$505.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A judgment consistent with this opinion will be entered.

Dated: July 8, 2022

/s/ Jane M. Beckering
Jane M. Beckering
United States District Judge